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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001493

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, PRM
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR JWOOD
OSD FOR SHIVERS
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SUBJECT: Afghanistan's Refugee Absorption Reaches Saturation

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Since January 1 of this year, 143,737 Afghan refugees - the vast majority from Pakistan - have repatriated to Afghanistan with assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While the numbers are relatively low compared to recent years, Afghanistan's ability to absorb more refugees is already strained. Meanwhile, visiting Pakistani ministers are stressing Afghanistan's "obligation" to take back its refugees by December 31, 2009. As that date approaches, we expect UNHCR Kabul to try to push back in indirect ways, including through the November 2008 Return and Reintegration Conference in Kabul. End summary.

Pakistan Increasing "Refugees Out By 2009" Drumbeat

¶2. (SBU) Visiting Pakistani Advisor to the Prime Minister on Interior Affairs and Narcotics Control Rehman Malik told President Karzai June 8 that Afghanistan is obliged to accept the return of all Afghan refugees by December 31, 2009. According to UNHCR, Malik was overstating his case - Pakistan's timetable is still not formally accepted by UNHCR Kabul or the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) - but President Karzai did not push back. Afghan Foreign Minister Spanta, when meeting with visiting Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi two days earlier, only reminded Qureshi that Pakistan's repatriation of refugees should be gradual, voluntary, and conscious of Afghanistan's capacity to resettle returnees.

¶3. (SBU) Any appearance of tacit consent or acquiescence to the 2009 deadline by IRoA senior-level officials undermines UNHCR and MORR's attempts to keep the issue alive in the Afghan/Pak/UNHCR Tripartite Commission context. Although the Tripartite Memorandum of Agreement establishes the 2009 expiration of Pakistan's Proof of Registration (POR) cards, the POR card expiration deadline is referred to as "renewable," and UNHCR Kabul and MORR Minister Sheer Mohammad Etibari continue to insist that the card expiration date and the repatriation deadline are not linked. According to UNHCR, Pakistani refugee officials have admitted privately that Afghans are likely to remain in Pakistan after 2009. UNHCR and Minister Etibari will maintain their position that the 2009 repatriation deadline is not agreed to and press Pakistan in the Tripartite Commission meetings to extend the POR card deadline and accept a more realistic repatriation timeline. Their current goal is to extend the POR expiration date until 2012, when Afghanistan's Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) will be implemented, and agree to a more realistic figure of one million Afghans returning over five years.

UNHCR Pursuing "Predictability of Staying" Along With Repatriation Strategy

¶4. (SBU) While visiting Pakistani ministers beat the repatriation drum in Afghanistan, UNHCR is quietly seeking compromises with both Pakistan and Iran that would give refugees "predictability of staying." Since UNHCR Kabul claims that legal integration, i.e., citizenship or permanent residency, has been a political non-starter with both countries, predictability must be achieved through indirect, incremental measures. These measures would boost funding and access to existing education and health programs for both refugees and hosting communities, and temporary residence status would be extended for longer periods, such as the three-year POR validity in Pakistan. Predictability of residency is particularly critical in Iran, where the recently extended Amayesh III refugee registration process only provides residency status for six months. Refugees there are constantly in limbo and unable to plan their lives for more than a few months at a time, obviously preventing full integration into the labor market and educational networks.

Fall 2008 Conference on Refugee Return and Reintegration

¶5. (SBU) UNHCR hopes the fall 2008 Conference will bring a dose of reality to the refugee arena and move the debate away from Pakistan's unilateral plan of "engineered return," i.e., 800,000 refugees returning each year between 2007 and 2009. The conference was proposed by the IROA and endorsed by the Joint Coordinating and Monitoring Board VI last year and will be co-hosted by Foreign

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Minister Spanta and UN High Commissioner Guterres this November in Kabul. The main objectives will be to develop a rational policy among Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and donors on how to successfully return and reintegrate a more realistic number of refugees in light of Afghanistan's limited absorption capacity. The Afghan government will also present the five-year reintegration strategy that is being developed and costed out now through the ANDS.

¶6. (SBU) UNHCR will also have to guard against MORR's attempts to grab donor resources. MORR has neither the will nor capacity to use resources in an effective or transparent manner, and the ongoing UNHCR-led ministry reform process has still not weeded out corrupt elements inside the ministry. UNHCR will instead channel donor funds to subject-matter experts, such as the Ministries of Education, Rural Development, or Water, to create schools, clinics, or water points in areas of high return. It is unclear if donors will ante up, however. Pakistan pledged \$20 million at the June 12 Paris Conference for refugee repatriation, and Iran said it would provide a \$300 million loan to Afghanistan over three years, presumably for refugee assistance. Other donors may be tapped out as well after the large contributions made in Paris.

Meanwhile, Squatter Camps Develop in Nangarhar And Laghman

¶7. (SBU) As the political posturing continues and the conference planning begins, refugee squatter communities are starting to stack up. At least 69 percent of all 2008 returns so far have been from Jalozi camp, and most families are returning to Nangarhar, Kunar, and Laghman provinces, with substantial return to Kabul province and the north. Six informal refugee settlements have mushroomed in Nangarhar and Laghman, with refugees claiming they cannot return to their places of origin (many in Kunar) due to landlessness, tribal conflicts, insecurity from anti-government elements, personal enmity, land disputes, and limited socio-economic opportunities. Some refugees have been moved to marginal areas, such as the Mehterlam Desert in Laghman or Chamtala Desert in Nangarhar, where they eke out a precarious existence, even with substantial humanitarian support.

¶8. (SBU) The draw for Nangarhar is most likely the job opportunities in Jalalabad city, the biggest commercial center in

the east. A group of 16 Nuristani families have reportedly opted to stay in Nangarhar and make a fresh start rather than scratching out a living in Nuristan in subsistence agriculture. But many 2005 returnees from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) still have not integrated; they live in temporary settlements, such as Hersashahi in Nangarhar, where the government wants the land for industrial purposes but the people claim they have nowhere to go. These returnees have been unable to reintegrate into the social and economic networks in either their province of origin or their adopted provinces. New returnees are following the same pattern by congregating in squalid temporary settlements, often in direct conflict with landowners, local government, and PRT-funded project implementers. Even though land was set aside in Kunar province for Jalozi returnees, they refuse to go. Conditions in the temporary settlements are often grim. Some Jalozi families in the north have no assistance and are living in a "buzkashi" (traditional Afghan horse polo-like game) field without even tent shelters or water. Others are surviving only through fragile and temporary assistance. With summer's extreme heat, the ongoing drought, and food price increases, this situation is unlikely to improve soon.

Who is Helping, and How?

¶9. (SBU) The international community, including PRM, is providing assistance through new or existing water, health, and education projects. The World Food Program is providing food for vulnerable families in the Mehterlam Desert, UNICEF is tankering in water to many settlements, UNICEF and a Danish aid organization are digging wells, and IOM, UNICEF, and UNHCR are distributing non-food items. A PRM-funded IMC clinic is serving 450 Kunari families in a new settlement near Tangi, Nangarhar. The Afghan government is also stepping up its efforts, with the Department of Public Health staffing some mobile clinics (with the support of WHO and UNHCR), the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development providing water and creating water points, and the relevant Departments of Refugees

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and Repatriation interceding with communities and trying to match resources with their needs. While these efforts are helpful, they cannot address the long-term reintegration needs of livelihoods, education, and security that will dictate whether these recent returnees stay in Afghanistan or go back to Pakistan or Iran in search, again, of a better life.

DELL